Opening extract from

Noughts and Crosses

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Published by

Corgi Childrens

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PROLOGUE

'Honestly, Mrs Hadley,' said Meggie McGregor, wiping her eyes. 'That sense of humour of yours will be the death of me yet!'

Jasmine Hadley allowed herself a rare giggle. 'The things I tell you, Meggie. It's lucky we're such good friends!'

Meggie's smile wavered only slightly. She looked out across the vast lawn at Callum and Sephy. Her son and her employer's daughter. They were good friends playing together. *Real* good friends. No barriers. No boundaries. Not yet anyway. It was a typical early summer's day, light and bright and, in the Hadley household anyway, not a cloud in their sky.

'Excuse me, Mrs Hadley.' Sarah Pike, Mrs Hadley's secretary, approached from the house. She had shoulder-length straw-coloured hair and timid green eyes which appeared permanently startled. 'I'm sorry to disturb you but your husband has just arrived. He's in the study.'

'Kamal is here?' Mrs Hadley was astounded. 'Thank you, Sarah.' She turned to Meggie. 'His fourth visit home in as many months! We're honoured!'

Meggie smiled sympathetically, making sure to keep

her mouth well and truly shut. No way was she going to get in the middle of another inevitable squabble between Kamal Hadley and his wife. Mrs Hadley stood up and made her way into the house.

'So, Sarah, how is Mr Hadley?' Meggie lowered her voice to ask. 'Is he in a good mood, d'you think?'

Sarah shook her head. 'He looks about ready to blow a fuse.'

'Why?'

'No idea.'

Meggie digested this news in silence.

'I'd better get back to work,' Sarah sighed.

'Would you like something to drink?' Meggie pointed to the jug of ginger beer on the patio table.

'No, thanks. I don't want to get into trouble . . .' With obvious trepidation, Sarah went back into the house.

What was she afraid of? Meggie sighed. No matter how hard she tried, Sarah insisted on keeping her distance. Meggie turned back to watch the children. Life was so simple for them. Their biggest worry was what they'd get for their birthdays. Their biggest grumble was the time they had to go to bed. Maybe things would be different for them . . . Better. Maggie forced herself to believe that things would be better for the children, otherwise what was the point of it all?

On those rare occasions when she had a moment to herself, she couldn't help but play 'what if' games. Not the big 'what if's that her husband sometimes liked to indulge in, like, 'What if a virus wiped out every single Cross and not a single nought?' or 'What if there was a revolution and all the Crosses were overthrown? Killed.

Wiped off the face of the planet.' No, Meggie McGregor didn't believe in wasting her time on big, global fantasies. Her dreams were more specific, more unattainable than that. Her dreams were all around one subject. What if Callum and Sephy . . .? What if Sephy and Callum . . .?

Meggie felt a peculiar, burning sensation on the back of her neck. She turned to find Mr Hadley standing on the patio, watching her with the strangest expression on his face.

'Is everything all right, Mr Hadley?'

'No. But I'll survive,' Mr Hadley moved forward to the patio table to stand over Meggie. 'You were deep in thought there. Penny for them?'

Flustered by his presence, Meggie began, 'I was just thinking about my son and your daughter. Wouldn't it be nice if . . ?' Appalled, she bit back the rest of the sentence, but it was too late.

'What would be nice?' Mr Hadley prompted, silkily.

'If they could . . . could always stay as they are now.' At Mr Hadley's raised eyebrows, Meggie rushed on. 'At this age, I mean. They're so wonderful at this age – children, I mean. So . . . so . . .'

'Yes, indeed.'

Pause.

Kamal Hadley sat down. Mrs Hadley emerged from the kitchen to lean against the door frame. She had a strange, wary expression on her face. Meggie felt nervous. She started to get to her feet.

'I understand you had a wonderful time yesterday.' Mr Hadley smiled at Meggie.

'A . . . a wonderful time?'

'Yesterday evening?' Mr Hadley prompted.

'Yes. It was quite quiet really . . .' Meggie replied, confused. She looked from Mr to Mrs Hadley and back again. Mrs Hadley was watching her intently. What was going on? The temperature in the garden had dropped by several degrees and despite his smiles, Mr Hadley was obviously furious at something – or someone. Meggie swallowed hard. Had she done something wrong? She didn't think so, but God only knew that being around Crosses was like walking on eggshells.

'So what did you do?' Mr Hadley prompted.

'P-pardon?'

'Last night?' Mr Hadley's smile was very friendly. Too friendly.

'I . . . we stayed home and watched telly,' Meggie said slowly.

'It's nice to have a relaxing evening at home with your own family,' Mr Hadley agreed.

Meggie nodded. What did he expect her to say to that? *What was going on?* Mr Hadley stood up, his smile now a thing of the past. He walked over to his wife. They both stood just watching each other as the seconds ticked by. Mrs Hadley began to straighten up. Without warning, Mr Hadley slapped his wife full across the face. The force of the blow sent Mrs Hadley's head snapping backwards to strike against the door frame.

Meggie was on her feet in a second, her horrified gasp audible, her hand out in silent protest. Kamal Hadley gave his wife a look of such contempt and loathing that Mrs Hadley flinched back from it. Without a word passing between them, Mr Hadley went back into the house.

Meggie was at Mrs Hadley's side in an instant.

'Are you OK?' Meggie's hand went out to examine the side of Mrs Hadley's face.

Mrs Hadley knocked her hand away. With a puzzled frown, Meggie tried again. The same thing happened.

'Leave me alone,' Mrs Hadley hissed at her. 'When I needed your help, you didn't give it.'

'I . . . what . . ?' And only then did Meggie realize what she'd done. Mrs Hadley had obviously used Meggie as an alibi for the previous night and Meggie had been too slow to pick up on what Kamal Hadley had really been asking her.

Meggie's hand dropped back to her side. 'I think I should get back to work . . .'

'Yes, I think that would be best.' Mrs Hadley's look was venomous before she turned and walked back into the house.

Meggie turned around. Callum and Sephy were still playing at the other end of the vast garden, oblivious to everything that had just happened. She stood and watched them, trying to capture for herself some small part of their pure joy in each other. She needed something good to hold on to. But even the distant sound of their laughter couldn't dampen down the deep sense of foreboding creeping through her. What would happen now?

That night, Meggie sat at the table sewing patches over the patches in Jude's school trousers.

'Meggie, I'm sure you're worrying about nothing,' Ryan, her husband sighed.

'Ryan, you didn't see the look on her face. I did.'

Meggie bit off the thread and picked up another patch. Jude's school trousers were more patch than original material.

The phone started to ring. Meggie picked it up before the first ring had even died away.

'Hello?'

'Meggie McGregor?'

'That's right.' Meggie's sewing fell unheeded to her feet.

'It's Sarah Pike here . . .'

Meggie couldn't help but notice the apology already in her voice. 'How are you, Sarah?'

'Fine, er . . . OK. Look, I've got some bad news . . .'

Meggie nodded slowly. 'I'm listening.'

Sarah gave an embarrassed cough before she continued. 'Mrs Hadley has asked me to inform you that . . . that your services at the Hadley household will no longer be required. She will pay you four weeks' wages in lieu of proper notice, plus give you a good reference.'

Meggie's blood turned to ice water in her veins. Whatever else she'd been expecting, it wasn't this. Heaven only knew it wasn't this.

'She's . . . she's really sacking me?'

'I'm sorry.'

'I see.'

'I'm really sorry,' Sarah's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Between you and me, I think it's grossly unfair.'

From one nought to another . . .

'It's OK, Sarah. It's not your fault.' Meggie replied.

She looked across at Ryan. His expression grew harder and tighter by degrees. Let him get upset. Let him be

angry. All she could feel was . . . nothing. A nothing that went way beyond the numbness enveloping every part of her body.

'Sorry, Meggie,' Sarah said again.

'That's OK. Thanks for letting me know. Bye, Sarah.'

'Bye.'

Meggie put down the phone. The clock on the TV counted out the silent moments that passed. 'That's the end of Jude's education,' she sighed at last.

'But we promised him we'd pay for him to carry on at school,' Ryan said, aghast.

'Pay with what?' Meggie rounded on her husband. 'The leaves off the trees? The hairs off our legs? What?'

'We'll find a way . . .'

'How? We're barely managing to survive as it was. What will we do without my wages coming in? Jude will have to forget about school. He'll have to go out to work.'

'You'll get another job,' Ryan tried.

'Not with another Cross family I won't. D'you really think Mrs Hadley will stand idly by whilst I get another job with one of her friends?'

There was dawning horror on Ryan's face as he realized what his wife meant.

'Yes, exactly,' Meggie sighed.

She stood up and moved to sit next to her husband on the old sofa in front of the fire. Ryan put his arm around her. They sat in silence for a long, long time.

'Ryan, we're in trouble,' Meggie said at last.

'I know,' Ryan replied.

Meggie jumped to her feet, her expression hard and

determined. 'I'm going to see her.'

'What're you talking about?' Ryan frowned.

'I've worked for that woman for fourteen years, ever since she was pregnant with her daughter Minerva. Seeing me is the very least she can do.'

'I don't think that's a good idea . . .' Ryan's frown deepened.

'Ryan, I need to get my job back. And if I have to beg, then so be it,' Meggie insisted, pulling on her coat. Her expression was now so hard, it might've been carved in granite.

'No, Meggie . . .'

'I don't like it any more than you do, but we have no choice.' Meggie didn't wait for any further argument. She headed out of the door.

Ryan watched his wife leave the house. No good would come of this. He could feel it.

Two hours later, Meggie was back.

And that was the night that Lynette disappeared . . .

THREE YEARS LATER . . .

Callum And Sephy

one. Sephy

I wriggled my toes, enjoying the feel of the warm sand trickling like fine baby powder between them. Digging my feet even deeper into the dry, yellow-white sand, I tilted back my head. It was such a beautiful August afternoon. Nothing bad could ever happen on a day like today. And what made it even better was the fact that I could share it – something rare and special in itself, as I knew only too well. I turned to the boy next to me, my face about to split wide open from the smile on it.

'Can I kiss you?'

My smile faded. I stared at my best friend. 'Pardon?'

'Can I kiss you?'

'What on earth for?'

'Just to see what it's like,' Callum replied.

Yeuk! I mean, *yeuk*!! I wrinkled up my nose – I couldn't help it. Kissing! Why on earth would Callum want to do anything so . . . so feeble?

'Do you really want to?' I asked.

Callum shrugged. 'Yeah, I do.'

'Oh, all right then.' I wrinkled up my nose again at the prospect. 'But make it fast!'

Callum turned to kneel beside me. I turned my head up towards his, watching with growing curiosity to see what

he'd do next. I tilted my head to the left. So did he. I tilted my head to the right. Callum did the same. He was moving his head like he was my reflection or something. I put my hands on Callum's face to keep it still and dead centre.

'D'you want me to tilt my head to the left or the right?' I asked, impatiently.

'Er . . . which way do girls usually tilt their heads when they're being kissed?' asked Callum.

'Does it matter? Besides, how should I know?' I frowned. 'Have I ever kissed a boy before?'

'Tilt your head to the left then.'

'My left or your left?'

'Er . . . your left.'

I did as asked. 'Hurry up, before I get a crick in my neck.'

Callum licked his lips before his face moved slowly closer towards mine.

'Oh no you don't,' I drew back. 'Wipe your lips first.'

'Why?'

'You just licked them.'

'Oh! OK!' Callum wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

I moved forward to resume my original position. Keeping my lips tight together, I wondered what I should do with them. Purse them so that they stuck out slightly? Or should I smile to make them seem wider and more appealing? I'd only ever practised kissing with my pillow. This was a lot different – and seemed just as silly!

'Hurry up!' I urged.

I kept my eyes wide open as I watched Callum's face

move down towards mine. Callum's grey eyes were open too. I was going cross-eyed trying to keep my focus on his face. And then his lips were touching mine. How funny! I'd expected Callum's lips to be hard and dry and scaly like a lizard's skin. But they weren't. They were soft. Callum closed his eyes. After a moment, I did the same. Our lips were still touching. Callum's mouth opened, making mine open at the same time. Callum's breath mingled with mine and felt warm and sweet. And then without warning his tongue was touching mine.

'Yeuk!' I drew back immediately and stuck my tongue out, wiping it with my hand. 'What did you do that for?'

'It wasn't that bad, was it?'

'I don't want your tongue on mine.' I shook my head.

'Why not?'

' 'Cause . . .' I shuddered at the thought of it, '. . . our spit will mix up.'

'So? It's meant to.'

I considered this.

'Well?'

'OK! OK!' I frowned, adding. 'The things I do for you! Let's try it again.'

Callum smiled at me, the familiar twinkle in his eyes. That's the thing about Callum – he looks at me a certain way and I'm never quite sure if he's laughing at me. Before I could change my mind, Callum's lips were already on mine – and just as soft and gentle as before. His tongue flicked into my mouth again. After a brief moment of thinking *ugh*! I found that it wasn't too bad. In fact it was actually quite nice in a gross-to-think-about-but-OK-to-do sort of way. I closed my

eyes and began to return Callum's kiss. His tongue licked over mine. It was warm and wet but it didn't make me want to heave. And then my tongue did the same to him. I began to feel a little strange. My heart was beginning to thump in a peculiar, hiccupy way that made me feel like I was racing down a roller-coaster, roaring out of control. Someone was tying knots with my insides. I pulled away.

'That's enough.'

'Sorry.' Callum sat back.

'Why're you apologizing?' I frowned. 'Didn't you like it?'

Callum shrugged. 'It was OK.'

I was annoyed. I didn't know why, but I couldn't help it. 'Have you kissed any other girls besides me?'

'No.'

'Any Cross girls?'

'No.'

'Any nought girls?'

'No means no.' Callum huffed with exasperation.

'So why did you want to kiss me?'

'We're friends, aren't we?' Callum shrugged.

I relaxed into a smile. 'Of course we are.'

'And if you can't kiss your friends then who can you kiss?' Callum smiled.

I turned back to the sea. It shone like a shattered mirror, each fragment reflecting and dazzling. It never ceased to amaze me just how beautiful the sand and the sea and the gentle breeze on my face could be. My family's private beach was my favourite place in the whole world. Kilometres of coastline that was all ours, with just a couple

of signs declaring that it was private property and some old wooden fencing at each end, through which Callum and I had made a gap. And I was here with my favourite person. I turned to look at Callum. He was looking at me, the strangest expression on his face.

'What's the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'What're you thinking?' I asked.

'About you and me.'

'What about us?'

Callum turned to look out over the sea. 'Sometimes I wish there was just you and me and no-one else in the whole world.'

'We'd drive each other crazy, wouldn't we?' I teased.

At first I thought that Callum wasn't going to answer.

'Sephy, d'you ever dream of just . . . escaping? Hopping on the first boat or plane you come across and just letting it take you away.' There was no mistaking the wistfully wishful note in Callum's voice. 'I do . . .'

'Where would you go?'

'That's just the point,' Callum said with sudden bitterness. 'This place is like the whole world and the whole world is like this place. So where could I go?'

'This place isn't so bad, is it?' I asked, gently.

'Depends on your point of view,' Callum replied. 'You're on the inside, Sephy. I'm not.'

I couldn't think of an answer to that, so I didn't reply. We both sat in silence for a while longer.

'Wherever you went, I'd go with you,' I decided. 'Though you'd soon get bored with me.'

Callum sighed. A long, heartfelt sigh which immediately

made me feel like I'd failed some test I hadn't even known I was taking.

'We'd better get on with it,' he said at last. 'What's the lesson for today, teacher?'

Disappointment raced through me. But then, what did I expect? *'Sephy, I could never be bored of you, with you, around you. You're exciting, scintillating, overwhelming company!'* Yeah, right! Dream on, Sephy!!

'So what're we doing today?' Callum's voice was tinged with impatience.

'OK! OK!' I said, exasperated. Honestly! The sun was too warm and the sea was too blue to do any schoolwork. 'Callum you've already passed the entrance exam. Why do we still have to do this?'

'I don't want to give any of the teachers an excuse to kick me out.'

'You haven't even started school yet and already you're talking about being kicked out?' I was puzzled. Why was he so cynical about my school? 'You've got nothing to worry about. You're in now. The school accepted you.'

'Being in and being accepted are two different things.' Callum shrugged. 'Besides, I want to learn as much as I can so I don't look like a complete dunce.'

I sat up suddenly. 'I've just had a thought. Maybe you'll be in my class. Oh, I do hope so,' I said eagerly. 'Wouldn't that be great?'

'You think so?'

I tried – and failed, I think – to keep the hurt out of my voice. 'Don't you?'

Callum looked at me and smiled. 'You shouldn't answer a question with a question,' he teased.

'Why not?' I forced myself to smile back.

Taking me by surprise, Callum pushed me over onto the sand. Indignant, I scrambled up to kneel in front of him.

'D'you mind?' I huffed.

'No. Not at all.' Callum smirked.

We looked at each other and burst out laughing. I stopped laughing first.

'Callum, wouldn't . . . wouldn't you like to be in my class . . ?'

Callum couldn't meet my eyes. 'It's a bit . . . humiliating for us noughts to be stuck in the baby class.'

'What d'you mean? I'm not a baby.' I jumped to my feet, scowling down at him.

'Jeez, Sephy, I'm fifteen, for heaven's sake! In six months' time I'll be sixteen and they're still sticking me in with twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. How would you like to be in a class with kids at least a year younger than you?' Callum asked.

'I . . . well . . .' I sat back down.

'Exactly!'

'I'm fourteen in three weeks,' I said, unwilling to let it drop.

'That's not the point, and you know it.'

'But the school explained why. You're all at least a year behind and . . .'

'And whose fault is that?' Callum said with erupting bitterness. 'Until a few years ago we were only allowed to be educated up to the age of fourteen – and in noughts-only schools at that, which don't have a quarter of the money or resources that your schools have.'

I had no answer.